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ABSTRACT

Although much research has examined the acceptance of psychological test feedback in an assessment/therapeutic setting, all of this research has been concerned with one-to-one relationships. A study was undertaken to assess the impact of test feedback about one partner on both members of a male-female couple. Male (N=48) and female (N=48) college students were assigned to male-female pairs. Half the couples were randomly paired strangers, half were paired with intimate partners. Subjects were randomly assigned to be participants who received feedback about themselves or observers who received feedback about their partner. Participants took a form of the Rorschach Inkblot Test and received in the presence of their partner a standard Barnum personality interpretation, purportedly derived from the test. Participants and observers individually rated how accurate they felt the interpretation was, recalled interpretative statements, and completed other relevant questionnaires. The results indicated that intimate couples rated the feedback as more accurate, remembered more of the feedback, reported more faith in psychological tests, and rated experimenter skill higher than did strangers. Male participants rated the feedback as more accurate than did male observers, suggesting that males may be more receptive of feedback in couples if they themselves have taken the test. (NRB)

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Effects of Sex, Intimacy, and Involvement on Acceptance of Generalized Personality Feedback

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Abstract. The purpose of the study was to assess the impact of test feedback about one partner on both members of male-female couples. Twenty-four males and 24 females ("participants") took an ink blot test and received a standard personality interpretation--purportedly derived from the test--in the presence of a partner (the "observer"). Half the pairs were strangers; the other half defined themselves as intimate friends. Intimate couples rated the feedback as more accurate, remembered more of the feedback, reported more faith in psychological tests, and rated experimenter skill higher than did strangers. Male participants rated the feedback as more accurate than did male observers. Males may be more receptive of feedback in couples if they themselves have taken the test.

There has been a wealth of research on acceptance of psychological test feedback in an assessment/therapeutic setting (the "Barnum effect"; Snyder, Ingram, & Newburg, 1982; Snyder, Shenkel, & Lowery, 1977). With the exception of one study of the Barnum effect in groups (Snyder & Newburg, 1981), all of this research has been concerned with one-to-one relationships. Little is known, however, about this feedback process in families and couples. It has been suggested that individual psychological tests given to one member of a family can serve the goals of family and couple therapy, and that the acceptance of generalized feedback might have implications for the use of psychological testing in family and couple therapy (Handelsman, Basgall, & Cottone, 1985). The purpose of the present study was to expand the parameters of the Barnum effect by assessing the impact of test feedback about one partner on both members of a male-female couple.

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One major difference between group and family therapy is that family

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members have a shared history while group members do not. This greater level of intimacy is potentially a source of support, with possible implications for acceptance of feedback. The first independent measure in the present study, therefore, was intimacy of couples. Half the couples in the present study were strangers, while half were people who defined themselves as close friends. It was hypothesized that intimate couples would accept feedback more than pairs of strangers. Since intimate couples may lend more support to each other and make each other feel more comfortable with the assessment process, it was also hypothesized that intimate couples would rate the experimenter as more skillful, and rate themselves as having more faith in psychological tests.

Previous research has consistently shown that people will rate feedback from psychological tests as more accurate for themselves than for people in general (Snyder, et al., 1977). There are no studies, however, which ask subjects to rate the accuracy of the feedback for another individual who has taken the test, a situation not unlike family and couple therapy in which one member of the family is tested. In the present study, one member of each couple was given a psychological test. Both that member and his or her partner were asked to rate the feedback purportedly derived from that test. It was hypothesized that the person for whom the feedback was purportedly derived (the participant) would accept it more than his or her partner (the observer).

The third independent variable was sex of the participant. In half the couples, the female took the test. In the other half, the male took the test. Since the previous Barnum effect research has not shown effects for sex (Snyder, et al., 1977), no such effects were predicted.

Method

Subjects and Design

Forty-eight male and 48 female volunteers from the University of Colorado at Denver participated in the study. Subjects were run in male-female pairs. Half the couples were strangers, and were randomly paired. The other half were couples who had previously identified themselves as intimately involved. Subjects were randomly assigned to be participants, who received feedback about themselves, or observers, who received feedback about his or her partner. The design was a 2 x 2 x 2 factorial, with the between subject variables of sex (male vs. female), involvement (participant vs. observer) and intimacy (couples vs. strangers).

Procedure

After signing a consent form and agreeing to participate, subjects filled out a questionnaire asking how well they knew each other. This question was a check on the intimacy variable. Other questions asked subjects to rate their faith in psychological tests and the skill of the experimenter.

The experimenter (a female) explained that a form of the Rorschach Inkblot Test would be administered to one of them (the participant). The other person (observer) was asked to wait in another room during the testing. Four Rorschach cards were then administered to the participant. Following the administration of the test the observer was asked to come back in. The subjects were then told that scoring of the test would take approximately 15 minutes, and they were encouraged to talk to each other during that time.

At the end of 15 minutes, the experimenter returned and gave the participant a handwritten copy of a "rough personality interpretation" purportedly derived from the test just taken. The observer was given a carbon copy of the same interpretation. In actuality, the feedback was a standard "Barnum"

personality interpretation (Forer, 1949). The subjects were asked to read the interpretation and, individually, to answer the following question: "Please indicate the extent to which you think the personality interpretation accurately describes your (or "your partner's") personality (a 9-point scale, in which -4 = not at all accurate; 0 = neither accurate nor inaccurate; +4 = extremely accurate)." The experimenter was out of the room whenever questionnaires were being filled out. The second questionnaire said the following: "The interpretation you received consisted of ten statements. Please recall as many of these as you can and write them below." Subjects were given ten minutes to complete this question. This recall measure has been used to gain additional information about the impact of personality feedback (Handelsman & Snyder, 1982). The next questionnaire contained several questions which were also asked at the beginning of the study. First was, "How well do you feel you know the other person in this study (-4 = not at all; -2 = somewhat; 0 = moderately well; 2 = very well; 4 = extremely well)?" Another question asked, "How much faith do you have in psychological tests such as inkblots as a means of gaining accurate information about people (-4 = no faith; -2 = some faith; 0 = moderate faith; 2 = much faith; 4 = extreme faith)?" Another asked, "How skillful do you believe your experimenter is in deriving personality interpretations of people (-4 = not at all skillful; -2 = somewhat skillful; 0 = neither skillful nor unskillful; 2 = somewhat skillful; 4 = extremely skillful)?"

After filling out all questionnaires, the subjects were thoroughly debriefed. Time was taken to elicit subjects' reactions to the study, to explain the deceptions involved and their reasons, and to discuss the implications of the study.

Results

Check of the Intimacy Manipulation

Subjects' responses to the question about how well they knew their partners were analyzed in a 2 x 2 x 2 analysis of variance, with the between subject factors of sex (male vs. female), intimacy (intimate couples vs. strangers) and level of involvement (participant vs. observer). The only significant result was a main effect for intimacy, $F(1, 88) = 691.75$, $p <$ = 1.16) than did strangers ($M = -3.67$, $SD = 1.33$).

Dependent Measures

The same 2 x 2 x 2 analysis of variance was performed on subjects' ratings of feedback accuracy. This analysis yielded a main effect for intimacy, $F(1, 88) = 30.28$, $p < .001$, such that intimate couples rated the feedback as more accurate ($M = 2.81$, $SD = 0.87$) than did strangers ($M = 1.35$, $SD =$ 1.77). There was also a significant involvement x sex interaction, $F(1, 88) =$ 1.68, $p < .007$. Subsequent Duncan's Multiple Range tests showed that male participants rated the interpretation as more accurate than did male observers ($p < .01$), $Ms = 2.88$ ($SD = 1.32$) and 1.67 ($SD = 1.01$), respectively. Female participants and observers did not differ, $Ms = 1.75$ ($SD = 1.57$) and 2.04 (SD = 1.22), respectively.

The 2 x 2 x 2 analysis of variance of subjects' recall of feedback yielded one significant result, a main effect for intimacy, $F(1, 88) = 7.58$, p < .008. Subjects in intimate couples remembered more statements ($M = 4.83$, SD = 1.90) than did strangers ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 1.84$).

Subjects' ratings of their faith in psychological tests were analyzed with a 2 x 2 x 2 x 2 analysis of variance, with the between subject factors as above, and the within subject factor of time (pre vs. posttesting). This analysis yielded a main effect for involvement, $F(1, 88) = 5.61$, $p < .03$, such

that participants reported more faith (M = 0.11, SD = 1.88) than did observers (M = -0.62, SD = 1.74). There was also a main effect for intimacy, $F(1, 88)$ = 16.99, $p < .001$. Subjects in intimate couples reported more faith in psychological tests (M = 0.39, SD = 1.90) than did strangers (M = -0.90, SD = 1.72). A third main effect was for time, $F(1, 88)$ = 18.55, $p < .001$, such that faith was higher after the testing and feedback (M = 0.18, SD = 2.08) than before (M = -0.69, SD = 1.86). This last effect was qualified by a significant intimacy x time interaction, $F(1, 88)$ = 8.17, $p < .006$. Subsequent Duncan's Multiple Range tests revealed that intimate subjects' faith increased from before (M = -0.33, SD = 1.94) to after (M = 1.11, SD = 1.86) the test, $p < .01$. For the strangers, there was no difference between pretest and posttest ratings, Ms = -1.04 (SD = 1.67) and -0.75 (SD = 1.77), respectively.

The same 2 x 2 x 2 x 2 analysis of variance was performed on subjects' ratings of the skill of the experimenter. There was a main effect for intimacy, $F(1, 88)$ = 12.66, $p < .002$, such that intimate subjects rated the experimenter as more skillful (M = 1.81, SD = 1.11) than did strangers (M = 1.00, SD = 1.47). There was also a main effect for time, $F(1, 88)$ = 32.21, $p < .001$. Subjects rated the experimenter as more skillful after the testing (M = 1.79, SD = 1.59) than before (M = 1.02, SD = 1.17). The analysis also yielded two significant interactions. The first was involvement x time, $F(1, 88)$ = 7.62, $p < .008$. Before the testing, participants and observers did not differ in their ratings of experimenter skill, Ms = 0.96 (SD = 1.12) and 1.08 (SD = 1.15), respectively. After the testing, however, participants rated the experimenter as more skillful than did observers, Ms = 2.10 (SD = 1.32) and 1.48 (SD = 1.56), respectively, $p < .01$. The second significant interaction was involvement x sex, $F(1, 88)$ = 8.52, $p < .005$. Among males, participants

rated the experimenter as more skillful than did observers, Ms = 1.79 (SD = 1.19) and 0.88 (SD = 1.53), respectively, $p < .05$. There was no significant difference between female participants and observers, Ms = 1.27 (SD = 1.25) and 1.69 (SD = 1.19), respectively. The difference in skill ratings between male and female observers was also significant, $p < .05$.

Discussion

The first hypothesis was confirmed--people in intimate couples were more responsive to the feedback. They rated it as more accurate, and they recalled more of it. They reported more faith in psychological tests, and showed an increase in that faith after the testing. Finally, they rated the experimenter as more skillful than did the strangers. If clinicians consider using the Barnum effect to enhance expectations for therapeutic change (Halperin & Snyder, 1979), it could be that such feedback should be given to couples sooner than to groups, in which the members are initially strangers.

The second hypothesis received less clear support. Participants did report more faith in psychological testing, and rated the experimenter as more skillful after the testing. However, only male participants rated the feedback as more accurate, and the experimenter as more skillful, than did male observers. There were no differences for females. Perhaps males were responsive to support from their female partner. It could also be that female participants did not feel supported by their male partners. Evidence for this possibility is the find that male observers rated the experimenter as less skillful than did female observers.

A major factor limiting generalization of the present results is that only a female experiment was used. The results may have been different with a male in that role. Given this limitation (or given a female clinician), however, one implication is that clinicians using testing to facilitate couple

therapy (Handelsman, et al., 1985) should test the male partner to obtain greatest acceptance of feedback.

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